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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the findings of a project that conducted a series of six focus groups to gather information from different employee groups about their perceptions of issues pertaining to the employment of individuals with disabilities. Focus groups were convened with human resource managers, supervisors, and coworkers of employees with disabilities (n=32). Key findings include: (1) administrators had more favorable opinions about the availability and efficacy of formal policies and programs already established at their workplaces than did supervisors or coworkers; (2) supervisors and coworkers commented on the importance of informal supports; (3) participants felt that the importance of informal supports is heightened when few formal supports exist; (4) it appeared that disability-related issues were considered out of bounds for discussion, in part because the restrictions of the Americans with Disabilities Act makes it difficult for anyone other than an employee with a disability to initiate discussions about disability-related issues; and (5) there continued to be an impression that issues related to the employment of individuals with disabilities is a "peripheral" issue that affects only a few people at the workplace. Findings that have implications for placement agencies, employers, and employees with disabilities are discussed. (Contains 35 references.) (CR)

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CENTER ON Work & Family
BOSTON UNIVERSITY

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES:

Workplace Experience with the Employment of Individuals with Disabilities

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1995

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INTRODUCTION

Programs and policies developed during the 1990s brought forth renewed hope that individuals with disabilities would have increased access to the work world. Unfortunately, current studies indicate that individuals with disabilities continue to experience significantly high rates of unemployment and underemployment. A 1994 survey conducted by the National Organization on Disability/Louis Harris and Associates found that more than two-thirds (68%) of individuals with disabilities who are of working age (i.e., between 16 and 64 years) were unemployed. Furthermore, among those people with disabilities who were employed, only two-thirds worked on a full-time basis (National Organization on Disability/Louis Harris and Associates, pp. 9 - 10).

In light of the on-going employment challenges faced by individuals with disabilities, decision makers and job placement specialists across the country have stressed the importance of gaining a better understanding of factors that have an impact on the employment experiences of persons with disabilities. The responsiveness of the workplace to the needs of individuals with disabilities (as indicated by practices, policies, and informal supports) represents one set of factors that can affect the labor market participation of persons with disabilities.

As one of the initial activities of a four-year research and training grant received from the National Institute on Disabilities Rehabilitation and Research, the Center for Promoting Employment conducted a series of focus groups to gather information from different employee groups about their perceptions of issues pertaining to the employment of individuals with disabilities.

The focus groups were used to explore two key issues:

1. factors that facilitate or inhibit the employment of individuals with disabilities; and

2. experiences of different employee groups (i.e., supervisors, coworkers, etc.) with the employment of individuals with disabilities.

This report summarizes the findings of six focus groups convened with human resource managers, supervisors, and coworkers of employees with disabilities.[1] The report has been organized into six sections.

- The first section, "Literature Highlights," provides the reader with information about previous research relevant to the employment of individuals with disabilities.

- The second section, "Methodology," describes the strategies used

[1] Other focus groups convened by the Center for Promoting Employment were designed to capture the perspectives of employees with disabilities as well as the opinions of their family members. These additional perspectives are reported in the article, "The Meaning of Work in the Lives of People with Significant Disabilities: Consumer and Family Perspectives," authored by Freedman and Fesko.

for data collection and data analysis.

- Section three, "Findings," discusses the five primary themes which emerged during the focus groups:

  - facilitators;
  - barriers;
  - current hiring practices;
  - supervisors' experiences with the employment of individuals with disabilities; and
  - coworkers' experiences with the employment of individuals with disabilities.

- The major research challenges associated with this study are outlined in section four, "Limitations."

- The fifth section, "Discussion and Implications," highlights options that can promote successful employment experiences for individuals with disabilities.

- The paper ends with a "Conclusion" section.

I. LITERATURE HIGHLIGHTS

A literature review was conducted to identify the findings of previous research that had examined:

- Factors that act as facilitators or barriers to the employment of individuals with disabilities.
- Workplace experiences with the employment of individuals with disabilities.

This literature review provided information that contributed to the design of the focus groups.

The Employment Paradox

The results of a recent study conducted for the National Organization on Disability (Louis Harris and Associates, 1995) indicated that there is considerable support within corporate America for the employment of individuals with disabilities. The findings of this survey, which reflected the responses of 404 executives from a cross-section of US companies, included the following:

- Three-fourths (73%) of the employers felt that people with disabilities represent an under-utilized labor population.
- 82% of the executives felt that the opportunities associated with the Americans with Disabilities Act are "worth the costs of its implementation."
- Between 1986 and 1995, the percentage of companies with policies and programs for hiring people with disabilities increased from 46% to 56%.

"People are a major asset to the company and we're always trying to make the job and person fit."

Human Resource Administrator

In spite of these positive signs, however, this study found only a slight increase in the percentage of companies which had hired individuals with disabilities. In 1986, 62% of the companies reported that they had hired individuals with disabilities. This rate was 64% in 1995.

In an effort to better understand the current employment situation, literature about facilitators and barriers to the employment of individuals with disabilities was reviewed.

Facilitators and Barriers

A number of investigations have gathered information about factors that affect the hiring of individuals with disabilities. The findings indicate that some of the key factors include employers' expectations, supervisors' skills and attitudes, and resources available at the worksite.

Research conducted by Greenwood et al. (1988) found that employers identified

the following factors as incentives to hire individuals with disabilities: available supply of qualified employees; ability to retain employees; on-the-job training funds; tax credits; and satisfaction derived from the employment of individuals with disabilities. Levy et al. (1993) found that employers who reported having had previous positive experiences employing individuals with disabilities were more willing to hire workers with disabilities in the future.

Fabian et al. (1995) asked employers and placement specialists to assess specific factors that can facilitate the employment of individuals with disabilities. The following factors were rated by employers as being important facilitators: top management support, strong corporate commitment, visible role models within the organization, training, qualified job applicants, assistance in dealing with negative workplace attitudes, the presence of an advisory committee for people with disabilities, and options for job sharing. Fabian et al. also collected information about barriers to the employment of individuals with disabilities. Employers identified barriers such as fears which exist at the workplace, prejudices, lack of familiarity with disabilities-related issues, downsizing, and limited workplace experience working with people with disabilities. The employers who participated in this study also indicated that supervisors' attitudes were key factors in the decisions whether to hire individuals with disabilities.

"There has actually been a shift in the top of the organization ....to open the doors a little bit more broadly to people with disabilities ..."

Human Resource Administrator

Sitlington and Easterday's (1992) survey asked employers about incentives related to the hiring of a candidate with mental retardation. The findings of this study suggested that an employer's assessment of a job applicant's future attendance patterns was an important factor in the hiring decision. Other factors included: the availability of on-going assistance/support, the probability of long-term employment, and the applicant's pre-job training. Shafer, Hill et al. (1987) found that the presence of an on-site job coach as well as financial incentives (e.g., targeted jobs tax credit) supported employers' decisions to hire individuals with disabilities.

Shafer, Hill et al. (1987) found that employers' personal values influenced the decisions about hiring individuals with disabilities. The respondents in this study who expressed a stronger belief that individuals with disabilities deserve opportunities to work were more receptive to hiring workers with disabilities. The results of an analysis prepared by Rabby (1983) suggested that the commitment of top management was an important factor in companies' decisions to hire individuals with disabilities. A study conducted by Drehmer and Bordieri (1985) found that personal biases related to the specific disability may exert an influence over hiring decisions.

A survey conducted by Jones et al. (1991) found that the following factors acted as disincentives to the hiring of individuals with psychiatric disabilities: concerns about absenteeism; perceptions of additional costs; lack of expertise regarding disability-related issues; and concerns about legal requirements/ restrictions. Nearly one-fourth (23%) of the corporate respondents reported that their companies had formal employment policies for individuals with psychiatric disabilities. The respondents in this study most frequently indicated that their companies had established formal policies pertaining to the hiring of individuals with disabilities in order to: 1) comply with affirmative action plans, 2) enhance public relations, and 3) convey the commitment of the companies' management.

None of the respondents indicated that their policies were established in response to financial incentives (e.g., targeted jobs tax credits). This finding was echoed by the results of research completed by Bullis (1994) who reported that the potential monetary benefits associated with Targeted Jobs Tax Credit was *not* a primary factor in employers' decisions to hire individuals with disabilities.

Workplace Experiences

Although there is only limited information about the workplace experiences of companies *after* they have hired individuals with disabilities, the results of previous research does offer some insights about the perspectives of employees with disabilities as well as the perspectives of coworkers/supervisors. A few studies have examined the impact of resources available at the worksite on workplace experiences with the employment of individuals with disabilities.

"It takes a lot of patience and time from your own work time to train someone ... In general though, I found it very rewarding to help someone become more productive and self-sufficient."

Coworker

1. Perspectives of Employees with Disabilities

Several studies have gathered information about the perspectives of employees with disabilities regarding their social relationships with other workers. In general, these investigations have found that workers with disabilities seem to have positive relationships with coworkers. There is evidence that workers with disabilities have more limited social interaction with coworkers and often do not form strong social relationships with them (Butterworth, 1994; Chadsey-Rusch 1990; Storey & Horner, 1991). A recent study conducted by Rusch et al. (1994) examined patterns of different types of social interaction. This research found that, according to most of the categories of social interaction measured, workers with and without disabilities had similar levels of interaction with coworkers. However, a major difference was noted regarding two types of social interaction: friendships and social interaction away from the workplace. Employees with disabilities reported fewer friendships and less interaction which took place outside of the worksite.

Previous investigations have found some differences in the interaction patterns among coworkers in comparison to the interactions between supervisors and employees. The results of these studies suggested that, in general, interactions among coworkers occur on a frequent basis and a large percentage of these interactions are nontask-related. In contrast, the interactions between supervisors and workers occur on a less frequent basis and are primarily task-related (Chadsey-Rusch & Gonzalez, 1988; Lignugaris-Kraft et al., 1988; Storey & Knutson, 1989). Research indicates that whereas the task-related interaction of workers with disabilities is comparable to those of coworkers without disabilities, the non-task related social interactions among coworkers occur at a significantly lower rate for employees with disabilities (Chadsey-Rusch, Gonzalez et al., 1989; Storey & Horner, 1991).

Parent et al. (1992) assessed interactions in the workplace for fifteen workers with mental retardation and fifteen nondisabled coworkers. While the overall number of interactions did not differ, some differences in the interaction patterns were noted: 1) Workers with disabilities had fewer breaktime interactions.

2) Workers with disabilities engaged in a higher number of work-related interactions. 3) A higher percentage of inappropriate interactions was noted among employees with mental retardation.

Ferguson et al. (1993) examined the types of interactions manifested at five worksites. The social milieu of these five job sites varied significantly, despite the fact that the jobs were very similar. The research team reported that, in comparison to workers with disabilities (i.e., mental retardation), nondisabled workers: gave more directions, asked more work-related questions, initiated more jokes, and had more general work-related comments. It was reported that although workers with disabilities interacted at about the same overall rate as their coworkers, the workers with disabilities initiated only about one-third as many interactions. Furthermore, in comparison to their nondisabled coworkers, individuals with disabilities received more greetings and social amenities. The researchers noted a negative correlation between the number of interactions with the job coach and the number of interactions with nondisabled coworkers that had been initiated by workers with disabilities. This finding suggested that the presence of the job coach may impede the development of relationships. The results of this study also indicated that the culture of a particular worksite may have a significant impact on social interactions at the workplace. A 1994 investigation conducted by Rusch et al. also found evidence that both the type of job/occupation and the social culture of the workplace may affect the social interactions and work experiences of workers with disabilities. These researchers found that workers who had job placements in light industry experienced less interaction with coworkers than workers in other job categories.

"Our mail clerk has Down Syndrome. He has a super memory... He will ask the names and birthdays of your children and on that birthday, he will say, "Tell your son that I said happy birthday." He's outgoing, giving and loving."

Coworker

Although previous studies that have focused on social relationships at the workplace have provided important insights about the characteristics of the patterns of interaction, to date, we have limited information about specific factors that influence the development of social relationships among workers with and without disabilities (Butterworth, 1994; Ferguson, 1993).

2. Perspectives of Coworkers

In contrast to the evidence that workers with disabilities may interact socially with coworkers at a lower rate, there is ample evidence which suggests that supervisors and coworkers consider workers with disabilities to be effective workers and to have good working relationships with coworkers and supervisors (Butterworth, 1994). This finding is consistent with other research which has found that most managers rate workers with mental retardation as satisfactory or above average workers (Marcouiller, Smith, & Bordieri, 1987; White & Rusch, 1983). Similarly, employees with autism were viewed positively by coworkers despite the presence of severe behavior problems and mental retardation (Belcher & Datlow-Smith, 1994). There is no evidence to suggest that the level of mental retardation is related to employees' attitudes toward coworkers with disabilities (Shafer et al., 1989).

The results of a study conducted by Belcher and Datlow (1994) suggested that, overall, coworkers seem to have positive attitudes about the presence of individuals with disabilities at the workplace. In this investigation, coworkers reported positive attitudes towards employees with autism; the greater the

amount of contact, the more positive were the perceptions expressed by nondisabled coworkers. Coworkers did *not* adjust their perceptions based on the presence of challenging behaviors, although it should be noted that a job coach was often present to manage these issues.

Rusch et al. (1991) found that while coworkers reported that they assumed a wide range of roles in supporting coworkers with disabilities, the highest percentage stated that they assumed a role of "associating," representing a minimal level of social commitment. In this study, very few coworkers reported friendships with the coworker with a disability. An investigation conducted by Hagner et al. (1992) found that coworkers felt that the supports which they offer to employees with disabilities are "nothing special." Although in some cases there were indications that the nondisabled coworkers offered an extraordinary amount of support, coworkers described the support they provided to coworkers with disabilities as ordinary and mutual. These findings indicate the potential contrast between observed patterns of interaction and coworkers' perceptions.

"Now, the agencies dealing with site training are so ... professional and able to give the help to lighten up the whole process for us and the employee."

Human Resource Administrator

3. Rehabilitation Service Assistance at the Workplace

The availability of supports and resources provided by rehabilitation agencies influence employers' decisions to hire individuals with disabilities. Greenwood et al. (1988) found that employers valued training and technical assistance such as help with employees who become disabled while employed; referrals; consultation on job modification; disability awareness training; consultation on affirmative action; and advice on architectural barrier removal.

Many of the employment supports for persons with disabilities, and in particular for individuals with more severe disabilities, have involved the presence of an outside resource known as a job coach or employment specialist who provides training and support at the job site. This individual is typically employed by a human service agency, and provides support in the job search and at the workplace to an individual. The involvement of an external employment specialist or job coach in the workplace has led to both positive and negative reactions from employers.

Shafer, Hill et al. (1987) reported that employers identified the presence of the job coach as a positive factor in their decisions to hire an individual with a disability. However, the findings of other studies suggested that, at times, the job coach can be intrusive in the workplace, and that employers express a preference for unobtrusive supports (Bullis et al., 1994). Some data indicate that the presence of the job coach may distance the individual with disabilities from coworkers. This social distance may create an aura of separate status for the individual which can interfere with naturally occurring social relationships in the workplace (Curl & Chisholm, 1991; Hagner, 1992; Udvari-Solner, 1990).

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II. METHODOLOGY

Rationale for the Use of Focus Groups

The Center for Promoting Employment developed a two-stage research design to gain a better understanding about workplace perspectives of the employment of individuals with disabilities. The focus groups (Stage I) were conducted prior to the development of the survey study about workplace inclusion (Stage II).

Focus groups have been defined as "..a qualitative research method that involves group interaction based on a selected topic." As noted by Krueger (1991), one advantage of focus groups is that they can produce findings that have high face validity and practical applications.

The focus groups were conducted for two primary purposes:

1. To gain qualitative insights regarding workplace perspectives about the employment of individuals with disabilities.

2. To inform the design of the questionnaire used for the survey study.

These uses of focus groups are among those recommended for qualitative research (Richter et al., 1991).

Participants

For this study, the Center gathered information about the perspectives of three groups at the workplace:

- management/human resources administrators;
- supervisors; and
- coworkers.

The Center for Promoting Employment was particularly interested in talking with representatives of companies that had employed individuals with disabilities. As a consequence, a purposive sampling strategy was designed. The Center asked two of the New England Projects with Industry[2] to each contact ten to twelve companies willing to participate in three sets of focus groups. Focus groups were convened with:

a) human resource administrators,
b) supervisors who had supervised at least one individual with a disability during the past five years, and
c) employees who had (during the past five years) been in a work group that had included an individual with a disability, but

[2] The Projects With Industry are non-profit organizations funded through the Rehabilitation Services Administration which promote the employment of individuals with disabilities by encouraging and supporting employer commitment to hiring individuals with disabilities. Many of these organizations offer job placement supports to individuals with disabilities who are seeking employment.

who had *not* had supervisory responsibilities for that employee.

A total of six focus groups were convened: three in a rural New England state and three in the metropolitan Boston area. Two groups were held for human resource administrators, two groups for supervisors, and two groups for coworkers. A total of 32 individuals participated. Each of the focus groups lasted for approximately two hours.

The participants were asked to provide personal demographic information. The data indicated that among the participants:

- Three-fifths (56%) were men.
- Four-fifths (82%) were over 30 years old.
- Half (52%) worked at companies which employed 1,000 or fewer employees.
- 55% had worked for their companies for less than five years.
- Half (52%) had worked with more than 3 individuals with disabilities.

Focus Group Questions

The two co-principal investigators drafted the focus group questions. These questions were reviewed by other members of the research team for clarity, content, and sequence. Although these questions were used as guidelines for the focus group discussion, the researchers/group facilitators encouraged the participants to feel comfortable exploring other issues relevant to the employment of individuals with disabilities. The participants responded to the following questions:

In your opinion,

Why has your company employed individuals with disabilities?
What expectations did your company have?
What factors acted as incentives/facilitators to employing individuals with disabilities?
What factors acted as barriers to employing individuals with disabilities?
What hiring processes does your company use?
Are these processes the same when considering an applicant with an identified disability?
What has been your company's experience with the employment of individuals with disabilities?
What have been your experiences with the employment of individuals with disabilities?

Data Analysis

With permission of participants, all of the focus group sessions were audio taped and transcribed. Four members of the research team (including two people who had attended the focus group sessions and two who had not been present) independently reviewed the transcripts for identification of key themes and issues. After comparing the findings of these independent reviews, a revised summary of the focus group findings was developed.

A list of the key issues which were raised in each of the six focus groups was sent to each of the participants. The researchers encouraged the participants to make comments, suggestions and corrections. None of the participants recommended changes in the focus group summaries.

III. FINDINGS

The focus group discussions provided insights about five key themes related to promoting the employment of individuals with disabilities:

- facilitators;
- barriers;
- current hiring practices;
- supervisors' experiences; and
- coworkers' experiences.

This section of the report provides information about specific issues related to each of these five areas.

Facilitators

The focus groups convened with human resource administrators and with supervisors were asked to talk about their perceptions of factors that facilitated their companies' decisions to employ individuals with disabilities. Four categories of facilitators emerged from these discussions: employers' expectations for positive outcomes; support of corporate leadership; awareness of compliance requirements; and response to advocacy efforts. There was considerable agreement among the human resource administrators and the supervisors about these facilitating factors.

"I'm not in the social service business. I'm not at all in the social service business... there's a bottom line, and if you don't keep the company successful, nobody's employed."

Human Resource Administrator

1. Employers' Expectations for Positive Outcomes

There was general consensus among the focus group participants that their companies had decided to hire individuals with disabilities because they had expectations (implicit or explicit) that these employment decisions would benefit either the organization, the community/customers, and/or the employee with a disability. The participants devoted particular attention to benefits that were: directly related to business objectives; indirectly related to business objectives; and/or related to organizational values.[3]

- Benefits Directly Related to Business Objectives

Many of the focus group participants stated that their companies' need to fill vacant positions with the most competent job applicants had influenced their decisions to hire applicants with disabilities. It was widely recognized that their employers would only hire an applicant with a disability if s/he could "do the job." The connection between the hiring decision and the business expectations was clear. As one participant observed, *"Can they do the job? Great. We'll hire them."* Some of the focus group participants suggested that when the company places a priority on being sure that the job will get done, less attention is paid to applicants' abilities/disabilities that are unrelated to specific job performance requirements. As one supervisor indicated, *".. you don't*

[3] Several of the participants acknowledged that their companies expected to realize benefits in more than one of these categories.

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set out to hire disabled people. It's something that comes along." In an effort to achieve a good match between applicants and job requirements, some of the focus group participants voiced the opinion that, *".. it's our obligation to look at people regardless of what their abilities or disabilities are."*

A couple of focus group participants felt that, in response to specific business challenges, their companies had targeted particular populations of individuals with disabilities seeking employment. One participant stated, *"We have always tried to hire disabled people, for selfish reasons, because so many jobs in (our) business are hard to fill."*

"It's part of the company mission... We re-structured our company to be much more community focused."

Human Resource Administrator

- Benefits Indirectly Related to Business Objectives

Nearly all of the focus group participants indicated that their companies seemed to have a fundamental belief that their viability and/or profitability would, in some way, benefit from their decisions to hire individuals with disabilities, even if this benefit seemed only indirectly related to short-term business objectives. Consistent with this perspective, many of the focus group participants viewed their hiring of individuals with disabilities as part of a corporate community relations strategy. Several of the human resources administrators made comments such as, *"We have established that as part of our mission statement that we will become a community asset."*

A couple of the participants indicated that they felt their companies had a public relations goal associated with hiring individuals with disabilities. Although this goal might be related to community relations, the emphasis of the public relations orientation was the enhancement of the corporate image which at least in theory, might impact market relations.

- Benefits Related to Organizational Values

The third perspective voiced by some of the focus group participants was that the decision to employ individuals with disabilities reflected the organization's commitment to corporate social responsibility. In these cases, the focus group participants seemed to feel that the benefits to the company were of secondary importance in comparison to the outcomes expected for the employee with a disability and for the community-at-large.

Several of the focus group participants commented that the hiring of individuals with disabilities was the "right thing to do." As stated by one human resources manager, *"..we believe that it is a moral issue."*

2. Corporate Leadership

A few of the focus group participants acknowledged that the support of top management had been a determining factor which affected their companies' decisions to hire an employee with a disability. For those companies where this hiring strategy represented a change in organizational practice, the commitment

displayed by top managers was identified as being particularly important. One of the human resource managers indicated that *"...it takes passionate leaders"* to promote the employment of individuals with disabilities.

3. Awareness of Compliance Requirements

Many of the focus group participants mentioned that their companies' desire to remain in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) had, to one extent or another, affected the organizations' decisions to hire individuals with disabilities. As noted by one of the participants, *"..number one, from our perspective, the law requires it."* It should be stated, however, that many of the companies which participated in this series of focus groups had apparently hired employees with disabilities prior to the passage of this legislation.

Particularly among the human resource managers, there was a basic recognition of the potential power of the ADA. One of the participants remarked, *"The law forces us to change our behavior and I respect that."* Other human resource administrators indicated that compliance issues were sometimes used within their companies as a way to encourage managers to consider candidates with disabilities. As one person explained, *"I think you hate to use the legislation as a stick with management. But sometimes it is important to point out to them that this is here and we have to abide by it."*

Although many of the participants talked about the importance of complying with the ADA, none reported that their companies' decisions to hire individuals with disabilities were solely motivated by compliance concerns. One of the participants summarized a conversation which had occurred with a top manager in the company, *"He said.. that's fine (e.g., complying with law) .. but let's not say that it's because of the law we want to do it, but because it's the right thing to do."*

4. Response to Advocacy Efforts

A few of the participants noted that a fourth factor had facilitated their organizations' awareness of the employment needs of individuals with disabilities: the efforts of advocacy groups/placement organizations. For example, one participant stated, *"I .. think that the agencies that represent... disabled people put a lot of pressure on HR (human resources) ... They (HR) get a lot of outside pressure...They (placement organizations) are so aggressive."* Although some of the participants suggested that the efforts of placement organizations had facilitated their companies' decisions to hire individuals with disabilities, there were mixed reactions among the participants about the impact of this pressure. In fact, some individuals seemed to feel that the advocacy efforts may have caused a negative reaction from the person making the hiring decision. One of the participants noted, *"I didn't feel any pressure to hire anyone else. No one else had a representative pushing them. They were just applying for a job...They're (e.g., placement organizations advocating for the employment of an applicant with a disability) a pain."*

Many companies hire people with disabilities because of legal requirments, but as one person stated, *"That's in addition to the fact that it is the right thing to do. And I do believe that most people believe it's the right thing to do."*
Human Resource Administrator

Barriers

Having explored some of the factors that facilitated the hiring of individuals with disabilities, the administrators' and supervisors' focus groups then discussed factors that inhibited these employment decisions. In contrast to the discussions about facilitators, the supervisors and the human resource administrators voiced differing perspectives about the perceived barriers to employment. Supervisors, in particular, expresses concern about having received limited organizational support to resolve issues with employees with disabilities. These supervisors tended to characterize their situations as being "caught in the middle."

Members of the supervisors' groups identified three types of barriers to the employment of individuals with disabilities: limited expertise the workplace needed to appropriately respond to the needs of individuals with disabilities, concerns about resolving workplace problems, and difficulties accessing resources needed for workplace support/accommodation. The human resource administrators focused primarily on: the impact of limited expertise at the workplace regarding disability-related issues and concerns about potential complaints, grievances and lawsuits.

1. Limited Expertise

Several of the participants indicated that they had only a rudimentary understanding about disabilities. It was their perspective that the limitations of their own knowledge created barriers to employment.

Many of the focus group participants seemed to feel that they did not possess the skills necessary to effectively respond to the numerous disabling conditions that could be present at the workplace. Supervisors, in particular, noted that they had not had sufficient training about any one, specific disability nor about the range of disabilities that they had encountered as supervisors. One supervisor noted, *"I had no education, no idea."*

A few of the participants expressed the feeling that they felt somewhat overwhelmed by their limited knowledge about the disabling conditions of particular employees.[4] Several participants suggested that this lack of expertise reduced their confidence in being prepared to respond to disability-related issues that might emerge at the workplace. Many of the supervisors indicated an interest in receiving information that might help them to more effectively respond to disability-related issues at the workplace.

2. Concerns About Resolving Workplace Problems

Some of the human resource administrators and the supervisors who participated in the focus groups expressed concern about their abilities to effectively respond to the performance problems manifested by employees with disabilities. Supervisors, in particular, stressed that they had concerns about: a) the characteristics of performance challenges; b) the adequacy of workplace

One supervisor commented on the importance of sharing information about employees competencies that might affect work performance. ***"... If you just pulled the (person training) aside and gave them a ten minute speech ...it will make it easier."***

[4] It is interesting to note that this sentiment was echoed by one supervisor even though he had been trained as a special education teacher.

response to performance problems and c) the potential of an employee with a disability filing a formal complaint. In addition, a couple of the supervisors discussed the outcomes of workplace resolutions that introduce equity problems into the work group.

- Characteristics of Performance Challenges

During the focus group sessions, two dimensions of performance challenges were discussed:

- the *predictability* of work performance challenges introduced by the disability (e.g., the extent to which the employees and/or the supervisor could anticipate if and how the disability might affect the fulfillment of specific work tasks) ; and
- the *frequency* of performance challenges introduced by the disability.

Focus group participants made many observations about the relationships between these two aspects of work performance and barriers to hiring individuals with disabilities. In general, the participants appeared to feel confident about their abilities to respond to disabilities which: a) affected work performance in a predictable manner and b) introduced performance challenges infrequently.

- Limited Workplace Response to Performance Issues

A couple of the supervisors indicated that their companies seemed to be very hesitant to discipline (or terminate) any employee with a disability. For example, one supervisor had been challenged by long-term performance problems exhibited by an employee with a disability. When this supervisor approached his supervisor and the human resource department for some guidance about how to address the problems, he was given a clear message: *"Whatever you do, 'He has to stay.'"*

A few of the supervisors indicated that the reluctance of the workplace to respond to performance problems exhibited by an employee with a disability puts supervisors in an untenable position. In response, some supervisors indicated that they felt they needed to carefully scrutinize the performance potentials of a job candidate with a disability prior to hiring because (unlike other employees who might not work out) it would be difficult for the supervisor to receive approval for termination if an employee with a disability did not perform according to expectations.

Supervisors indicated that, in those situations where they have limited options for responding to performance problems, their relationships with employees are bound to suffer. Among the focus group participants, this frustration seemed related to the supervisors' recognition of an apparent contradiction in organizational values about the importance of job performance. Virtually all of the focus group participants agreed that, at the point of hiring, their companies are only concerned with candidates' performance potentials; that is, the company

"Middle managers are in an incredible position... They are always having to deal with all the laws (OSHA, ADA, etc.)."

Human Resource Administrator

focuses exclusively on whether or not the applicant with a disability can do the job. However, supervisors seemed to feel that the organizational perspectives changed if the employee who was hired did not perform the job according to expectations. In those cases, the supervisors felt that their workplaces expected them to retain the employee with a disability even if the performance problem was not resolved.

- Complaints, Grievances, or Lawsuits

Several comments were made during the focus groups which indicated that there is concern at the workplace about the possibility of employees with disabilities filing unwarranted complaints. There was some feeling among the supervisors that the protections afforded by civil rights legislation such as the ADA can be manipulated by employees. One supervisor noted, for example, that the productivity of one employee with a disability dropped off as soon as her probationary period ended and she became a permanent employee. The supervisor stated, *"I was wondering whether or not she had been trained in using the system."*

A few of the supervisors indicated that they felt that some employees with disabilities tended to view all of their workplace experiences through the lens of their disabilities (i.e., that employees with disabilities tended to "explain" things that had happened in terms of their disabilities). This perception was noted particularly when the employee might have felt that a particular workplace experience was negative. Referring to an employee with a disability, one supervisor stated,*"...anything that you say to her... she believes it's because of her handicap (sic)."*

Many of the focus group participants had the impression that the legal protections for employees with disabilities are so complicated and vague that what might seem like standard workplace practice will become the basis for a lawsuit. As a result, some employers feel that hiring individuals with disabilities can be "risky."

- Potential Perceptions of "Preferential Treatment"

A few of the participants in the supervisors focus groups expressed concern about equity issues within their work groups. These concerns became barriers to supervisors who wanted to respond to their employees in a manner which the supervisors perceived to be fair and equitable. Two aspects of the equity concern were discussed: a) using the same "operating rules" as guidelines for employees' rights and responsibilities, and b) establishing common standards for performance.

A couple of supervisors explained that they tended to "bend the rules" for employees with disabilities. One supervisor noted that he did not require one worker with a disability to be present for the full, eight-hour day even though this employee was considered to be a full-time employee. Another supervisor commented that, in comparison to nondisabled coworkers, more "exceptions" are granted to employees

"You have to make him fit in as much as possible, but don't put a whole lot of strain or what ever, because I think people resent that."

Supervisor

with disabilities. He observed,"*...everybody else had to give two weeks' notice... if they want (ed) a vacation . If he* (e.g., the employee with a disability) *wanted it, he could have it."* These supervisors held the opinion that workplace practices based on these kinds of "exceptions" could create concerns about coworker equity. A second equity concern was associated with the "lean and mean" philosophy which has emerged in many corporations. Several supervisors remarked that a combination of factors (such as increased competition and workforce reductions) had prompted their companies to raise their expectations for employee performance (e.g., augmented worker output, longer hours, expanded job responsibilities, etc.). However, these higher standards were often not applied to employees with disabilities. A few supervisors expressed concern that this uneven set of expectations sometimes required coworkers to pick up even more work to compensate for the fact that the employee with a disability may already be working at what is perceived to be his/her productivity limit. One supervisor noted, *"The thing about it is,when you start making these accommodations, the stress that it puts on the rest of the unit..."* In response, another focus group participant stated, *"We're very understaffed right now, and there's a kind of focus on this one individual (and coworkers seem to be thinking), 'Boy, if hewasn't here, (or if) ...he was productive, it would take a whole lot, a great load off the rest of the staff."* Supervisors often expressed concern that, given the increased expectations for departmental outputs, coworkers may end up assuming additional responsibilities when one or more employees perform at a minimally acceptable level.

"It gets to a point where you can't be asking more of the other employees, to pick up more and more and more."

Supervisor

3. Difficulties Accessing Resources for Accommodations

Participants in each of the six focus groups discussed their concerns about not having the resources (e.g., time, money, experience and expertise) needed to adequately support the employment of individuals with disabilities. These difficulties were often identified as barriers to the employment of individuals with disabilities.

A few of the focus group participants indicated that the legal requirements for reasonable accommodation at the workplace created an additional barrier that is not associated with the employment of other population groups protected by civil rights legislation. One of the focus group participants summarized his feelings by stating, *"... the Blacks, the females, the sexual groups, all the other groups, you put 'em in and hope they do the job. But they don't come with the accommodations package beside them."*

Although several of the supervisors stated that they thought that most of the accommodations made at the workplace had not been not particularly expensive, the financial burden often fell on the specific department where the employee with a disability was assigned. Given the firms' emphases on cost-cutting measures, many of the supervisors felt that this cost allocation system introduced disincentives to the hiring of individuals with disabilities. One supervisor reflected on the department's experience trying to respond to the need of an employee with a hearing impairment for an interpreter. *"And there's*

no policy or procedure in place to handle the interpreter. There's no procedure for who pays for interpreters. Because you run into a problem if you say that your department is responsible for all of the charges on supporting a person with disabilities, then that's on your overhead ... And you have a disincentive to hire these people."

It is important to note that although many of the human resource managers felt very optimistic about the efficacy of existing workplace supports (e.g., the policies and programs already established by their companies), few of the supervisors were confident that they could readily access resources (either inside or outside of their companies) that would adequately support the needs of employees with disabilities.

Current Practices

The third major topic of the focus groups concerned the hiring practices used by the participants' companies. Supervisors and administrators discussed several themes related to their companies' hiring processes: the locus of decision making; factors which affect the hiring decision; job candidate review process; and hiring skills.

1. Hiring Decisions Made at the Local Level

There was general consensus among all of the focus groups that hiring decisions are usually made by supervisors at the local departmental level, and not by human resources. The human resource administrators tended to view their own influence on hiring individuals with disabilities as minimal, noting that time constraints did not allow them to conduct outreach to departments even if a senior management commitment to hiring people with disabilities existed. This emphasis on local control suggests that the attitudes of individual supervisors can have significant influence over the extent to which the workplace is accessible to candidates with disabilities.

According to the focus group participants, company decision-makers (i.e., individuals other than direct supervisors) tended to become more involved in hiring decisions during periods of time when the company had hiring freezes or restrictions. Many supervisors expressed the opinion that, in response to the labor cut-backs that have gripped so many companies, hiring decisions are being more carefully scrutinized by higher level administrators such as human resource managers.

2. Supervisors' Experiences Affecting the Hiring Decision

The administrators and supervisors who participated in the focus groups indicated that previous experiences with individuals with disabilities could influence decisions about hiring job candidates with disabilities.

- Previous Workplace Experiences

  Three of the focus groups (both of the two administrators' groups and one of the supervisors' groups) discussed how past experiences with workers with disabilities could affect the supervisors' hiring decisions. According to the participants, past successful experiences increased the likelihood that a new candidate would be viewed favorably. However, a couple of the administrators observed that a supervisor's positive, previous experience was sometimes related to the supervisor having unrealistic expectations for future job candidates. Consequently, if a supervisor wanted to hire someone who would be "just like the previous employee," there was a risk that the supervisor would be disappointed.

- Personal Experiences

  Several of the participants in the focus groups shared information about their relationships with friends and/or family members with disabilities. These participants indicated that their personal relationships with these individuals had heightened their sensitivity to disability-related issues

"We have established as part of our mission statement, that we will become a community asset. As for the whole company, I can only speak for this office."

Human Resource Manager

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and had also increased their receptivity to employing a job applicant with a disability.

3. Pressure to Hire

Participants in each of the two supervisors groups mentioned that, in some cases, they felt pressure to hire employees with disabilities. A few of the supervisors indicated that this pressure came from the companies' human resource recruiters or managers with a commitment to employing individuals with disabilities. Other supervisors mentioned that the source of the pressure came from external organizations such as placement agencies and human service groups. This pressure was negatively viewed by several supervisors.

4. Process of Reviewing Job Candidates

When discussing specific hiring practices, there was some indication that representatives of human resource departments may respond to applicants with disabilities in a different way than they react to other job candidates. In one administrators group, participants acknowledged that the human resources departments were sensitive to the fact that an applicant's decision to reveal a disability during the application process may affect (positively or negatively) the decision-making process during screening of applicants. Participants in one of the supervisors' groups noted that the application process may differ if an applicant is represented by a human services agency (e.g., more direct involvement of placement representative).

5. Skills Associated with Hiring Processes

Participants in the human resource administrators groups commented on the importance of supervisors developing effective job descriptions and interviewing skills. These administrators felt that most supervisors have not adequately been prepared to write job descriptions that specify the essential functions of the job. This difficulty was perceived as having a negative impact on supervisors' ability to conduct an interview that can clarify whether the candidates have a skills-match for the essential functions.

One human resource administrator indicated that disability-specific information is sometimes removed from job application materials before it is forwarded to company department heads.

Supervisors' Experiences

Participants in the supervisors' focus groups offered a number of observations about their experiences with employees with disabilities. Although each of the supervisors who participated in the focus group had unique supervisory experiences, several issues emerged that were common to many of the participants. The supervisors examined the following issues: experiences associated with inclusive workplaces; unintended consequences of accommodations; supervisory roles; boundaries of supervisory responsibilities; responding to employee attitudes; impact on supervisory skills; limited workplace supports; and supervisors' emotional involvement.

1. Inclusive Workplaces Introduce Unique Issues

Nearly all of the supervisors commented that, in some way, their experiences supervising individuals with disabilities introduced new challenges that they had not previously encountered as supervisors. These new supervisory experiences ranged from limited, "one-time" situations (e.g., adapting parking arrangements and entry access) to more complicated and on-going situations (e.g., helping an employee with a disability negotiate social interactions). It is important to note that several of the supervisors stated that they did not feel that these employees necessarily had more problems, just that their presence at the workplace may have introduced specific challenges that had not before arisen.

"... just because they don't have the same working capacity as some of the other (employees) doesn't mean that they have more problems..."

Supervisor

Supervisors expressed particular concern about problematic social interactions that might occur between an employee with a disability and coworkers. One supervisor discussed the social isolation that employees with disabilities sometimes experience. He stated, *"...nobody talks to him, he has no interaction, he eats lunch alone."* Although a few of the focus group participants felt that supervisors should focus only on work behaviors that are directly linked to performance (e.g., *"Those are the extra things. You should just work more on productivity first..."*), a couple of participants felt that the negative impacts of social isolation might become an issue for the work group in addition to having a negative impact on the work experience of the employee with a disability.

Another concern expressed by supervisors was their inclination to try to shield employees with disabilities from the insensitive and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors of other people at the workplace. One of the participants commented, *"...you have to see...the problems that they have. ... they have feelings, and you have to deal a lot with the feeling part of it...we like to say everybody (e.g., other employees) understands, but there is that individual that might say something...it's just constant monitoring to make sure that their (sic) life is.. (okay)."*

2. Unintended Consequences of Workplace Accommodations

A few of the focus groups participants indicated that they felt confusion about whether various workplace accommodations have the unintended consequence of placing more (rather than less) emphasis on the disability. This seemed to pose a particular dilemma for those supervisors who felt that employees with disabilities want to be treated "just like" other employees. One supervisor indicated that he had supervised an employee who expressed resentment when

special exceptions seemed to be made for her. This supervisor commented, *"..she said she did not want to be considered a handicap (sic). She didn't want the special treatment."*

3. Expanded Supervisory Responsibilities

Several of the supervisors commented that their supervisory responsibilities were expanded when their work group included an employee with a disability. Many of the supervisors indicated that they devoted more time to their employees with disabilities than to other employees. In some situations, the extra time seemed to be related to the close task supervision needed by the employees. It was the experience of other supervisors that the demands for supervisory time may have resulted either from social and/or emotional problems experienced by the employee with a disability.

A few of the supervisors were dissatisfied about situations where they felt they had to invest additional time supervising employees with disabilities. One supervisor stated,*"...it's more of a burden as a supervisor.."* Another observed, *"I think we get into a philosophical issue.. how much time and energy (are invested in supervising an employee with a disability who is experiencing performance problems) .. how do you support everybody else? ...And should we be putting.. all this time and effort into (one employee)?...He needs so much more that we just don't have the time for."*

"...sometimes they take a little more supervision.. .sometimes it comes to the point where it's too much work."

Supervisor

4. Expanded Boundaries of Supervisory Roles

A few of the supervisors felt that their relationships with employees with disabilities had expanded their supervisory roles. Some of supervisors were of the opinion that, in comparison to other employees, they were more likely to become directly or indirectly involved in the non-work aspects of the lives of employees with disabilities. These supervisors seemed to be aware of the needs which employees with disabilities may have for medical, housing, transportation and social service supports. A couple of these supervisors felt personal responsibility to monitor the availability of these supports. For instance, one supervisor expressed heart-felt concern about a particular employee and stated, *"... she has no place to go and her relatives are all much older. So this is what I am facing now..."*

Although most of the supervisors indicated that they realized that the boundary between "supervisor" and "friend" or "advisor" is often blurry, a few of the supervisors questioned the appropriateness of a supervisor becoming too involved in employees' personal and social problems. Several supervisors expressed particular concern about workplace situations where employees' seek counseling from the supervisor.

Although some of the supervisors indicated that they were willing to venture into this somewhat unfamiliar territory of the non-work domains of employees' lives, a few felt that these new roles went beyond the purview of the supervisor/employee relationship. One supervisor questioned, *"How much.. can you.. stay involved?"*

5. Employees' Attitudes About Work

A few of the supervisors indicated that they felt some employees with disabilities used their disabling conditions as excuses for poor performance. One supervisor expressed frustration about an employee who seemed to explain her work behaviors in terms of her disability. This supervisor offered an example of the challenges he faces when he attempts to address his concerns about her performance. *"She sits there and drinks her coffee when she's sitting at her desk...and when I ask her about.. all these breaks.. she says, 'I have to take my pill for... something. ..' I can't tell her to stop doing this, because now she can say, 'Well, I was just taking my medication.'"* Most supervisors felt that employees' negative attitudes usually have nothing to do with the employees' disabilities *per se*.

6. Potential to Strengthen Supervisory Skill

A couple of supervisors indicated that they felt that their experiences supervising an employee with a disability provided them with an opportunity to strengthen their supervisory skills. These focus group participants suggested that, as a result of having this experience, they had been able to further develop abilities such as flexibility, sensitivity and creative problem solving. One supervisor summarized his thoughts by stating, *"... I think they make you a better supervisor... (I have) learn(ed) to be more compassionate. It's made me a better supervisor through the years."*

Some supervisors indicated that their new skills might benefit other employees. One supervisor who had recently considered the possibility of offering training supports to an employee who had a disability mused, *"But if this works out... this is an approach not only with her...It may be ... that I have to work with these type of things with everyone."*

7. Limited Workplace-Based Resources and Supports

Most of the supervisors stated that they had received very little support when they tried to respond to the needs of employees with disabilities. In many cases, the supervisors felt that the workplace saw them as being solely responsible for resolving some of the complicated workplace challenges that may arise with employees with disabilities. Several of the supervisors commented that this situation can make them feel as if they are "on their own" to deal with any problems, particularly in those situations where the supervisors had not have made the hiring decision (e.g., an employee transferred from another department).

The issues which presented challenges to the supervisors ranged from confusion about legal constraints to developing creative approaches to workplace accommodations. One of the participants stated, *"And again, that's why I think it's important that, as supervisors, we get some kind of direction from the hierarchy or the upper management..."* One supervisor observed, *"(We are)... trying to work through these issues, and we really need some support to help us."*

Several of the supervisors indicated that they had the perception that they were

"...you're kind of... left out there hoping you're making the right decision... I don't know if there's any right way or wrong way... there's nothing out there to help front line super-visors..."

Supervisor

expected to resolve any issues associated with their employees with disabilities--not because they were perceived as being the "experts" or the people most appropriate to resolve these issues but because there were no other people at the workplace more qualified to respond to any workplace challenges. One supervisor stated, *".. my experience with HR is that they are not really set up to.. manage this sort of problem."* Another participant in this same focus group added, *"They're not trained, probably."*

There was a shared sentiment among the supervisors that they want to offer the best supervision that they can to employees with disabilities but that they can easily become overwhelmed by some of the challenges. One supervisor noted, *"..when it comes down to the day-to-day operations.. you literally don't get the support, and you're kind of fighting this battle day-to-day."*

8. Emotional Involvement

There were many indications during the focus group sessions that the supervisors felt quite involved in their relationships with their employees with disabilities. Several supervisors suggested that they felt a personal sense of responsibility for the employment experiences of individuals with disabilities but that they did not have much confidence that their usual "portfolio" of supervisory strategies would be appropriate for these employees. One supervisor discussed his experiences with an employee with a disability who had experienced on-going performance problems. One on occasion, this employee had failed to successfully complete an assigned task in a timely fashion. The supervisor explained that he had responded to this employee the way he would have responded to any other employee in this situation: he became angry. *"And I felt bad, because I was yelling at him about a legitimate problem, and actually I was yelling at him because he was not producing something that I needed, and there were legitimate reasons for yelling at him... And by the end of this, I felt bad.. and I said to (another supervisor), 'Do you think he's going to be okay?'... I guess I need somebody there who will say, 'Oh, it's okay that she yelled; she yelled at him for a real reason.'"* It was clear that most of the supervisors who participated in these focus groups experienced a great deal of discomfort about any negative reactions they might have to the performance problems of employees with disabilities.

Several supervisors stated that their experiences supervising employees with disabilities included both "highs" and "lows." Although many of the participants indicated that they get a sense of personal satisfaction when their interactions with employees with disabilities have positive outcomes, these relationships often posed challenges to other supervisors. One of the supervisors reflected, *"It's very hard. It's just very, very hard."* Another observed, *"It's stressful to try to deal with it."*

One supervisor discussed some of the difficulties he had encountered supervising a particular employee. As a result, the supervisor indicated that he was initiating a strategy of collaborative supervision. In part, this arrangement was designed to provide additional support both to the supervisor and to the employee with a disability. The supervisor stated, *"And I've been just too involved."*

"...we're taking so much time in trying to figure it out, where if we had some support, we could (work this out)."

Supervisor

Coworkers' Experiences

The coworkers almost universally described the experience of working with a person with a disability as positive. In one group, participants indicated overwhelmingly that they had derived a lot of satisfaction from having the opportunity to work with a coworker with a disability. These positive feelings were in striking contrast to the concerns of supervisors regarding issues such as the time devoted to supervising employees with disabilities and the equity of specific supervisory decisions.

Coworkers discussed a wide range of issues including: informal (e.g., "person-to-person") supports; the workplace as the context for the employment of individuals with disabilities; systems supports (e.g., training or accommodations); and the importance of assertiveness of employees with disabilities.

1. Informal Supports

Several of the coworkers acknowledged that they perceived themselves to be primary sources of support for coworkers with disabilities. It was the perception of these coworkers that the informal support which they provided to coworkers with disabilities emerged naturally from personal relationships. The coworkers commented that, in general, employees often provide each other with informal assistance -- coworkers just help each other without any second thoughts. This same attitude was expressed about their relationships with coworkers with disabilities. Coworkers reported that they sometimes assumed the role of "buddy" to a coworker with a disability. While this was sometimes a formal arrangement, such as being designated to assist the person during a fire drill, it was more often an informal situation that developed out of a personal relationship.

"It's just your coworkers helping each other to do things."

Coworker

Although the focus group participants recognized that coworkers with disabilities sometimes required additional support or attention, the nondisabled coworkers did not describe the need for this support as problematic. Coworkers' views on the overall experience were realistic but positive, as suggested by one participant who said, *" ...it takes a lot of patience and a lot of time to train someone so that they can do sometimes a very simple job... I found it very rewarding to help someone become more productive and self-sufficient."*

Participants indicated that supports for employees with disabilities were typically developed on an informal basis by supervisors and workers. Some participants described this as being left "on their own" to make decisions. Several of the focus group participants described specific circumstances when they helped to identify challenges experienced by their coworkers, and made suggestions for solutions.

Recognizing the relationship between the level of informal supports and the employment experience of workers with disabilities, some participants suggested that it might be worthwhile to assess the responsiveness of coworkers and supervisors before a person with a disability is hired and assigned to a work group.

2. Influence of the Workplace Context

Coworkers talked extensively about business and cultural factors within a company that affect the employment experience of workers with disabilities. Several of the focus group participants worked in companies that were experiencing layoffs and restructuring, and these experiences had lead to greater pressure on all employees to do more. The participants suggested that departments which are shorthanded or under pressure may have a more negative perception of a worker with a disability. In general, the coworkers emphasized the importance of understanding the overall hiring experiences of a company as a context for the employment of persons with disabilities. For example, it was noted that employees with disabilities hired just after a layoff may find that the workplace is not as receptive to their needs and supports.

"I mean the job market cooled 10 to 15 years ago...The whole economy plays a major role in the decision process."

Supervisor

It is significant that despite the concerns about equity raised by the supervisors' groups, the coworkers did not express concerns about equity regarding workloads or the use of accommodations.

3. Need for Formal Assistance and Resources

There were mixed feelings within the coworkers' groups about the extent to which their companies had already developed formal systems (e.g., policies, practices, programs) to address the needs of workers with disabilities. A common perception was that companies had limited expertise in supporting workers with disabilities. In general, like the participants in the supervisors' groups, coworkers expressed the opinion that companies should be more proactive in meeting the needs of workers with disabilities. It should be noted, however, that some of the participants stated that their companies tried to actively anticipate the needs of employees with disabilities.

The coworkers identified a range of supports that could promote positive employment experiences for individuals with disabilities such as designating a resource person at the worksite who has expertise with disabilities-at-the-workplace (e.g., someone available at the worksite to help employees with disabilities resolve needs and challenges). One participant suggested that companies identify an employee with a disability willing to serve as an internal consultant.

The participants in the coworkers' groups stressed the importance of three types of formal resources: policies, accommodations and training.

- Policies

Several participants commented that their companies had not established clear policies regarding employees with disabilities. One participant stated, "*...but these decisions are made by line managers...it's not formal. No one would tell you that this is our policy.*" A couple of the members of the coworkers' groups interpreted the fact that their companies had few formal policies as evidence that companies prefer to do the least possible for employees with disabilities.

Some of the participants observed that there was an inconsistency between policy and practice at their worksites. For example, at one company every employee had recently completed a training program on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as part of a company-wide initiative. During this same time period, the company was re-designing its training center. However, when some the training staff recommended that the architectural and structural plans for the training center anticipate and respond to the needs of employees with disabilities, their suggestions were not reflected in the final plans.

• Accommodations

Several of the participants at one of the coworkers' groups indicated that their human resource departments were not usually involved in making arrangements for accommodations once a person had been hired. Many of the coworkers perceived that the needs of a worker with disabilities were typically addressed locally, either by the employee alone or with the assistance of coworkers or supervisors.

According to some of the coworkers, workplace accommodations were rarely offered on a formal basis. As a result, many employees with disabilities were "on their own" in terms of learning the job and locating equipment or other supports that would help them meet job expectations. One of the coworkers commented, *"... at least from a management perspective, it's kind of like, 'Do the least you can.'"*

"There just seemed to be no support mech-anisms, and you hire them... and you're on your own. Once you say 'yes,'... you're kind of on your own."

Supervisor

• Training

Many of the coworkers expressed a strong need for information that could help them support coworkers with disabilities. These focus group participants perceived their lack of knowledge as a barrier to the social inclusion of employees with disabilities. One participant noted, *"Sometimes people, in not knowing how to deal with someone, can be a little standoffish because you just don't know what to say or do... It's just people not knowing how to deal with someone."* Participants noted the importance of preparing a work group before an employee with a disability begins their job. One coworker stated, *"I think a lot of us, a lot of people, just are very ignorant as to how to deal with people with disabilities, myself included."* Several coworkers indicated an interest in participating in training if it were available.

A few of the coworkers felt that training sessions might offer the participants an appropriate setting to discuss their experiences with issues related to disabilities at the workplace. Several of the focus group participants indicated that they felt a certain degree of awkwardness discussing these issues with coworkers, both those with disabilities and those without disabilities.

4. Importance of Employee Assertiveness

A few coworkers observed that positive employment experiences seemed to

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emerge when employees with disabilities assumed an active role in being sure that their work needs were met. In some situations, this self-advocacy meant that the employee with a disability had requested specific accommodations. One participant noted, *"I found out that she had to have some special phone equipment...She really had to go out and contact the contractor, do it herself, to get it in here."*

IV. LIMITATIONS

This exploratory investigation was designed to provide insight into workplace perspectives about the employment of individuals with disabilities. As indicated by the discussion of the findings in the previous section of this report, the study did achieve this primary purpose. However, the methodology used for this study introduced limitations, most notably those associated with sampling and reliability and validity.

Sampling

The researchers used a purposive sampling strategy to identify companies that would be invited to the focus groups. The workplaces were selected by placement organizations which had previously established relationships with these companies. Furthermore, each of the companies was recognized as a worksite that had, in the past, employed at least one individual with a disability. The companies were located in two principal geographic regions: New Hampshire and the greater metropolitan Boston area. It is uncertain whether other different employers (in the same or other geographic regions) might have similar perceptions about the employment of individuals with disabilities.

A limited number of individuals (32) participated in the focus group sessions. Furthermore, due to the exploratory nature of this study, there was no effort to select focus group participants that would be representative of a defined population of employees. It should be noted that the focus group participants were individuals who were willing to share their perspectives about the employment of individuals with disabilities.

The combination of these factors restricts the generalizability of these findings to other populations.

Reliability and Validity

The research design limited the possibilities for addressing questions about reliability and validity. The focus group technique restricts the facilitators' abilities to verify the extent to which each of the participants agreed or disagreed with the observations made by a single person. Although the findings presented in this report reflected the comments made by more than a single individuals, there was no data collected that indicated the number of people who shared particular viewpoints.

Although the focus group sessions were taped and transcribed, the theme analysis conducted by the researchers ultimately depended on the interpretation of the researchers. While the researchers did make efforts to check these interpretations with the participants (e.g., by offering them an opportunity to review the list of topics discussed during the focus group sessions), there were no opportunities to confirm the findings with other data (e.g., triangulation as a result of interviews, surveys, observations, etc.).

V. DISCUSSION and IMPLICATIONS

Several important themes emerged from the analysis of the focus group discussions. Many of the findings listed above are consistent with the results of previous studies. In addition, however, the focus group participants articulated some perspectives not previously addressed in published reports.

- Employees at all levels found it easier to articulate the barriers to the employment of individuals with disabilities than the facilitators.

- Administrators appear to have more favorable opinions about the availability and efficacy of formal policies and programs already established at their workplaces than do either supervisors or coworkers. In general, supervisors and coworkers expressed a need for an expansion of workplace-based supports.

- Supervisors and coworkers commented on the importance of informal supports. It was noted that positive employment experiences are often the result of the efforts and ingenuity of people in the work group (e.g., employee with a disability, coworker, and/or supervisor).

- Focus group participants felt that the importance of informal supports (e.g., assistance provided by coworkers, positive expectations supported by a flexible organizational culture, etc.) is heightened in those situations where few formal supports (e.g., policies, programs, etc.) exist.

- It appears that there is an aura of non-discussibility concerning disability-related issues. In part, the restrictions of the ADA make it difficult for anyone other than an employee with a disability to initiate discussions about disability-related issues. An unintended consequence of existing policies and practices may be that they continue to make disabilities a "taboo" topic even though natural, supportive conversations could help to reduce barriers to employment.

- There continues to be an impression that issues related to the employment of individuals with disabilities is a "peripheral" issue that affects only a very few people at the workplace.

  In part, this myth is perpetuated because many disabling conditions, such as substance abuse and chronic serious heath conditions, are not visible. Furthermore, most assessments of the incidence of disabilities among employees are cross sectional studies that capture the existence of disabilities only at a specific moment in time. However, by taking a life-course perspective (e.g., the numbers of individuals who will experience a disabling condition over the span of their working years), it is clear that a higher percentage of employees are directly affected by disabling conditions than is commonly recognized.

  Another important issue that is often unrecognized is that the inclusion of individuals with disabilities at the workplace has secondary impacts

on a wide circle of people. Supervisors, coworkers and family members (many of whom are also workers for some employer) may become involved (to one extent or another) in the employment experiences of individuals with disabilities. When it is understood that these individuals are also "stakeholders" in the success of the employment experiences of individuals with disabilities, disabilities at the workplace will no longer be considered an issue that has limited importance for the workplace.

The findings of the six focus groups suggest implications for placement agencies, employers, and employees with disabilities.

1. Placement Agencies

- *Establishing Contact at the Local Level:* The participants in the focus groups re-affirmed that many hiring decisions are decentralized within companies. This indicates that it may be necessary for placement specialists to develop multiple relationships with company representatives (especially with those people who actually make the hiring decisions) rather than relying on a single relationship (e.g., contact with the human resource agency).

- *Reframing Disabilities at the Workplace:* Placement agencies can help employers to understand that disabilities issues are not peripheral concerns. Placement agencies might encourage employers to consider the percentages of employees who either have a disabilities themselves (for some period of time during the course of their adult work life) or who have family members with disabilities.

- *Expertise:* Few companies have experts at the workplace who possess in-depth knowledge about the range of disabling conditions. Placement agencies could link employers with resources (e.g., information and experts) that could support workplace response to the needs of employees with disabilities.

- *Informal Supports:* Placement agencies could enhance their support of positive employment experiences for individuals with disabilities by facilitating the informal and natural supports that develop at the workplace (e.g., among coworkers). Placement agencies should be careful that the resources which they make available do not displace or replace informal supports.

2. Employers

- *Training:* Employees at all levels expressed interest in training about disability-related issues. To date, much of the workplace training about disabilities has been placed in the context of the ADA. However, little attention has been focused on the day-to-day experiences of supervisors and coworkers. Training that emphasizes the importance of informal supports and normalized social interactions could encourage employees to better understand how they can contribute to the successful

employment experiences of employees with disabilities. Supervisors, in particular, expressed a need for assistance with "problem solving" around issues of performance expectations and performance problems. Supervisors also indicated a need for opportunities to meet with their peers to talk about common experiences and concerns.

- Good Management Practices: It is possible that one of the most effective ways for employers to enhance the positive employment experiences for individuals with disabilities is to promote generic, good management practices. For example, managers who are skillful in promoting effective team work are likely to be managers who provide the supports needed when the team includes an employee with a disability. There was some awareness among the focus group participants that:

  a) The development of "good" management practices would benefit all employees, not just employees with disabilities.

  b) Effective workplace response to the employment needs of individuals with a disabilities often takes "no more" than the implementation of generic "good" management practice (e.g., listening skills, problem solving skills).

- Balance Between Formal and Informal Supports: There was general consensus among the focus group participants that supportive workplace environments are characterized by the presence of complementary formal and informal supports. Worksites could enhance the positive employment experiences of individuals with disabilities by monitoring the extent to which the development of formal policies and programs affects existing informal supports. There is the possibility that the expansion of formal policies and programs has the unintended consequence of being a disincentive to problem solving and support at the local level.

3. Employees with Disabilities

- Assertiveness: The focus group participants expressed the opinion that workplace responsiveness to the needs of employees with disabilities is enhanced when these needs are clearly articulated. Employees who have disclosed disabilities to the workplace may find that their employers can more effectively offer supports if the workers initiate discussions about their performance needs.

- Accessing Natural Supports: Coworkers who participated in these focus groups voiced the opinion that people at the workplace are generally willing to help one another. The focus group participants felt that employees with disabilities should feel comfortable accessing this network of mutual assistance which exists at the workplace.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the six focus groups convened for this study suggest that workplaces continue to experience both rewards and challenges associated with the employment of individuals with disabilities. Although the themes that emerged from these focus groups do not provide definitive "answers" to questions about all aspects of workplace perceptions of the employment of individuals with disabilities, the findings do suggest that the day-to-day challenges have an impact on employer receptivity to hiring individuals with disabilities.

The preliminary findings of this study suggest that it would be beneficial for future studies to explore the following issues:

- Relationships between formal policies and informal social relationships.
- Barriers and facilitators to the employment of individuals with disabilities by employers with a small number of employees (e.g., workforces of 50 or fewer individuals).
- Outcomes of training designed for supervisors of employees with disabilities.

It is anticipated that continued efforts to better understand workplace perceptions will contribute to efforts designed to promote the successful employment of individuals with disabilities.

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